



## Looking for Savvy Girls in the Post-Girl-Power Era

—Natalie Coulter

Currie, Dawn H., Deirdre M. Kelly, and Shauna Pomerantz. *"Girl Power": Girls Reinventing Girlhood*. New York: Peter Lang, 2009. 282 pp. ISBN 978-0-8204-8877-6. \$33.95 pb. Print. Mediated Youth 4.

Durham, M. Gigi. *The Lolita Effect: The Media Sexuality of Young Girls and What We Can Do About It*. New York: Overlook, 2008. 286 pp. \$24.95 hc. ISBN 978-1-59020-063-6. Print.

Lamb, Sharon, and Lyn Mikel Brown. *Packaging*

*Girlhood: Rescuing Our Daughters from Marketers' Schemes*. New York: St. Martin's, 2006. 336 pp. \$24.95 hc. ISBN 978-0-312-35250-9. Print.

Levin, Diane E., and Jean Kilbourne. *So Sexy So Soon: The New Sexualized Childhood and What Parents Can Do to Protect Their Kids*. New York: Ballantine, 2009. 240 pp. \$15.00 pb. ISBN 978-0-345-50507-1. Print.

Wow, I'm shell-shocked. Being a mother of two young daughters, I am terrified. The world is fraught for my daughters. After reading four books on the state of girlhood, my initial reaction is horror. Here's what I have to worry about: songs with lyrics that quip "if it isn't rough it isn't fun," toddler-sized French-maid outfits amid the racks of Disney Princess dresses sold at Halloween (Durham 204), Bratz dolls that come

with hip-hugger underwear and padded bras (Levin and Kilbourne 42), and T-shirts for four-year-olds emboldened with the slogan "spoil me . . . cuz I'm worth it" (Lamb and Brown 27). What kind of world are my girls headed into? How will I deal with the pressures on them to be the sassy little vixens that popular culture tells them they should be?

Of course, prior to actually having children, I had

always thought that, as a scholar of children's culture and girls' studies, I would have the proper tools to allow me to calmly eliminate these pressures on my daughters. I would intuitively raise young socially aware girls who would make their groovy girl dolls drive trucks and be airplane pilots. Well, hah! What was I thinking? Having just survived a Christmas in which my four-year-old daughter begged for a Barbie doll wearing black high-heeled boots, I am beginning to realize my powerlessness in the face of the frothy pink princess machine that seems to suck up young girls.

But perhaps this reaction is not fair. Perhaps I am being too sensitive to the images of girlhood in the media culture that surrounds my girls and I am just blindly falling into a moral panic about the state of girlhood. Well, not if the authors of these books are right. These authors suggest that girls are surrounded by culture that constantly tells them that they have little value, and what value they do have is in being sexual. But, as these works reveal, girls' relations with this popular culture is complex and talking to them about it is very messy.

*The Lolita Effect*, written by University of Iowa journalism professor M. Gigi Durham, is a thoughtful, well-researched exposé on what she terms the "Lolita Effect." The basic premise of Durham's work is that the media (she includes everything from video games to teen magazines) circulates five damaging myths about girls' sexuality. Together, these myths make up the

"Lolita Effect," which is "the distorted and delusional set of myths about girls' sexuality that circulates widely in our culture and throughout the world that works to limit, undermine, and restrict girls' sexual progress" (12). The first myth is that girls don't choose boys, boys choose girls—but only sexy girls; second, that there is only one kind of sexy; third, that girls should work to be that type of sexy; fourth, that the younger a girl is the sexier she is; and fifth, that sexual violence can be hot. These myths get more and more worrisome as Durham systematically works her way through them. Building on a wide range of examples, Durham succinctly illustrates how each of the myths came into being and how they operate. Durham argues that these myths work together to produce an image of girls' sexuality that is purely spectacle.

Each of the five myths provides a basis for a chapter, and each myth is followed by a section entitled "What Can We Do" that supports Durham's mission of providing the tools to respond to these myths "so that we can work together in the best interests of the girls who look to us for guidance" (12). In these sections, she provides clear examples of how to engage girls in a dialogue that allows them to explore the stereotyped images of girlhood and change how the myths affect their lives.

Durham is aware that the immediate response by parents may be to shield their daughters from such imagery or to call for media censorship. But keeping



... her purpose is to  
engage the “real world  
goals of cultural studies”  
by paring down an  
academic analysis to be  
accessible.



girls away from such imagery is not a realistic approach. Neither of these responses is a solution that offers any real form of empowerment for girls; rather, they both reinforce that girls aren't good enough. Instead, Durham urges parents to provide a more balanced response by engaging girls in a critique of the media, and she offers meaningful tools based on her own experiences as an educator. For example, in getting girls to discuss how the media often presents images of sex that are coded with violence, she suggests that girls often initially claim that they are unaffected by such imagery or that the presentation is funny or not realistic; Durham maintains that this initial response may be a socially acceptable way to respond. To counteract this evasion, Durham offers a series of questions to elicit more conversation, such as “Why are the girls so often sexual right before the violence occurs? What's the message here? Why aren't boys shown in the same way? Are girls being punished for being sexual?” (153).

Durham's book is well researched, and, instead of overusing academic jargon, she is sparse with her references in an attempt to appeal to a more popular audience instead of academics. I applaud Durham for this. Right at the beginning of the work, she argues that her purpose is to engage the “real world goals of cultural studies” by paring down an academic analysis to be accessible. Durham has the intellectual “chops,” so to speak: not only is she a professor of journalism, but also her contribution to academic scholarship in the field of girls' studies and cultural studies is impressive. *The Lolita Effect* is clearly supported by this intellectual foundation without getting bogged down in a critical analysis that might alienate the mainstream audience it is geared for.

The second book in this genre is Sharon Lamb and Lyn Mikel Brown's *Packaging Girlhood: Rescuing Our Daughters from Marketers' Schemes*, and it is similar to *The Lolita Effect*. *Packaging Girlhood*, as the subtitle indicates, is written for parents who feel powerless against the tremendous weight of the media machine that tells girls they need to be smiling little divas. In catering to this audience, the authors, Sharon Lamb, a professor of psychology, and Lyn Mikel Brown, a professor of education and human development, reveal little about their methodology or theoretical approaches, but this is not to imply that their work is not methodologically or theoretically grounded. While they don't clearly lay out their methodology, it becomes evident throughout the work that they rely on a diverse range of research sites: they conducted surveys of over six hundred girls (9), and interviewed many other girls formally in focus groups and informally in malls and stores. They also interviewed parents, school counsellors, teachers, and coaches. On top of this, they immersed themselves in the media culture of girls by watching the movies, reading the books, perusing the stores, and listening to the music that are all marketed to girls. The outcome of their research is a thoughtful, detailed survey of girl's culture that attempts to incorporate girls' voices into the analysis. This is the real strength of their work: instead of just giving lip service to including girls' voices, Lamb and Brown have seamlessly woven the voices of more

than six hundred girls into their critique.

Like Durham, Lamb and Brown advocate for media literacy. Parents can be powerful allies to girls, teaching them to read culture and uncover the hypocrisy. Parents can work with girls to give them the tools to challenge the narrow images of girlhood that they are shown in the media. Lamb and Brown warn that simply telling girls media is bad, sexist, or wrong will only alienate them and encourage them to think that their parents don't get it. Instead, the idea is to give girls the tools to be critical of the messages directed toward them (9). The goal for Lamb and Brown is to encourage girls to become either observers of the media by learning how to notice marketers' ploys and critique them, or even better, to become resisters who can directly challenge the media and replace the stereotyped images of girlhood with their own realities (9). This is a laudable goal that recognizes the agencies of girls themselves in negotiating the narrow frameworks of girlhood.

The book contains five chapters, each one addressing a different medium: fashion, film, music, books, and toys. Each chapter follows girls as they grow from being a child to a tween and then a teen. I find the authors' choice to include the book industry very interesting, since books are overlooked in *So Sexy So Soon* and *The Lolita Effect*. This is critical because, as Lamb and Brown suggest, often parents and educators assume that reading is such a virtuous activity that we don't have to worry about the sort

of sexist images that plague the other media forms. “Wrong,” Brown and Lamb tell us. The authors take a wide range of books to task; fodder for their critiques includes everything from Dr. Seuss’s failure to include central female characters (159) to the mixed messages of Hermione Granger, the character in the Harry Potter series who is a strong, smart girl but who is continually described by her peers as annoying (172).

One argument that stands out for me in this work is Lamb and Brown’s lament of the lack of close girl friendships in media for girls. On the surface, it would appear that girls are always portrayed with their friends, but closer analysis reveals that often these friendships are superficial and get pushed aside in pursuit of romantic interests. Best friends are frequently introduced as accessories: they do not get to go on adventures and they are not developed as characters; they never rescue friends and they are rarely integral to the plot line. The girl buddy film does not exist alongside a plethora of boy buddy movies (90). This is particularly troublesome given the importance of friendships in girls’ lives and the potential for these friendships to provide positive spaces to deflate some of the power of the media.

One of the strengths of *Packaging Girlhood* is that the authors recommend alternative media products. For example, both the chapter on movies and the one on books conclude with a list of suggestions for movies and books that feature strong girls with fewer

stereotypes.

The book concludes with a chapter entitled “Rebel, Resist, Refuse: Sample Conversations with Our Daughters.” The chapter delivers exactly what its title promises: it provides sample conversations based on the three principles that Lamb and Brown lay out in their introduction. “Principle 1: do your own work,” meaning that parents need to take the time to understand what it is about an item that makes them uncomfortable before discussing it. “Principle 2: listen to your daughter, what she likes and why she likes it.” “Principle 3: bring your daughter the world on your terms through your broader view”; the point is not to “bulldoze her with your views or shut her down.” Instead, it is to be part of the conversation and a “player in your daughter’s world” (10–11). I find the sample conversations based on these principles to be realistic, practical, and revealing of the messiness of talking with our daughters.


The third book I read was *So Sexy So Soon*, by Diane E. Levin and Jean Kilbourne. *So Sexy So Soon* is premised on many of the same conclusions outlined in both Durham’s and Lamb and Brown’s books, but Levin and Kilbourne are much more assertive in claiming an impact on girls. While the other two books are coy in stating the direct outcomes of the problematic representations of girls, Levin and Kilbourne are not so cautious. They spend much less space attesting to the negative portrayals of girlhood and instead focus

much more of their attention on the impact on girls. They claim that the harmful media messages that girls consume can lead to serious problems in their later years. The authors overtly refer to the media as a “toxic cultural environment” (12) and allege that the “sexualisation of childhood is having a profoundly disturbing impact on children’s understanding of gender, sexuality and relationships” (7). The media can have clear, damaging impacts on our youth. But the problem is bigger than just children; it can take its toll on families, parents, and schools, the book tells us.


Most of the book is centred on the impacts of the media and ways to counteract such impacts through media literacy. While the voices of girls themselves are present in this book, they are not a substantial component of the analysis. Despite this, Levin and Kilbourne appeal to adults to understand what kids are getting from the media. They urge parents to talk and to ask. They warn that parents who fail to ask what a child might get from the media could blow it out of proportion, based on our own fears and misunderstandings (23). “Try to look at the media through the lens the child is looking through,” they urge (56). These arguments acknowledge that young people are active social agents in their own lives, but, since much of the authors’ analysis is centred on adult perceptions of children’s media, ultimately, this text characterizes youth as simply being “duped” by the powerful patriarchal media. What I did appreciate

about this book over the other two is Levin and Kilbourne’s call to push beyond simple media literacy, which puts the pressure on parents, and instead to advocate for structural changes to the “toxic cultural environment.”

Overall, I want to hate these three books. I want to cast them off as nothing more than unjust attempts by adult women to raise the alarm on the state of girlhood. I want to deride these books for failing to privilege girls’ voices and relying on the authors’ own readings of the media. I want to dismiss them for being nothing more than feeble arguments that ultimately imply that young girls are duped by a patriarchal media machine (a critique similar to Driscoll’s view on many feminist readings of popular culture). But I can’t. For one thing, some of these authors do try to incorporate the views of girls, particularly Lamb and Brown, who use interviews and surveys as part of their critique. Another reason is that these books reveal the limited discourse that is offered to girls. Each of these three books, in its own way, argues that the social and cultural representations of girlhood are too narrow and one-dimensional. They are not so much diatribes against the image of the girl, a narrative that would most likely alienate the girls themselves, but a critique of the lack of diversity in the representation of girls. It is the ubiquity of the image of girls, as vacuous “little hotties” who spend their time fantasizing about boys and their next trip to the shopping mall, that is the problem. As the authors



. . . blocking commercial  
culture is not a realistic  
solution for parents.



have all illustrated, the representation of girls and in particular girls' sexuality is too restrictive.

Of course, this leaves me to wonder, why this image of girlhood? It doesn't make any sense. There are so many media products available in our diverse mediascape; why are we presented with such limited stereotypes of girlhood? Well, the resounding answer, as all of these books ultimately suggest, is that it's a cheap and easy way to get girls' attention. Narrow stereotypes that play on the same repetitive tropes of girls' sexuality are easy stories to tell, particularly in a mediascape that is designed and manufactured by media and marketing executives who are focused on the bottom line. The underlying theme of all three of the books connects girls' sexuality with commodity culture. Not only does "sex sell," meaning that the sexual image is a simple way to get girls' attention, but also "sex sells" products. The sexualized representation of girlhood means that girls must enter into the commodity culture that sexualizes them. To be a little diva means going to the mall and buying the appropriate paraphernalia; a "cute little vixen" needs to buy the cute little vixen clothes, while princesses need princess gowns, shoes, makeup, and more.

The purpose of all three of these books is the same. While their recounting of the images of girlhood can feel discouraging at times, all three of these books close with a story of hope in the form of media literacy. Each of the books acknowledges that blocking commercial culture is not a realistic solution for parents. Turning off the television or pulling the plug on the Internet are not feasible solutions for children who need to engage with current media culture in order to connect with their peers. As Lamb and Brown state, the goal "is not to keep girls away from the real world, but

to join with them in understanding it, rising above it, detaching from it and critiquing it" (xii). The books are also quick to position themselves away from a conservative politic of censorship. They are not against the representation of sex or teaching girls about their sexuality; the concern is the limited types of portrayal. As a solution, they all advocate for empowering girls, arming them with the tools they need to challenge the narrow myths of girlhood. Ultimately, the authors all advocate for media literacy, particularly media literacy on the part of parents providing their daughters (and to a much lesser extent their sons, which is troubling because they too need to be part of the conversation) with the skills they need to be critical of representations of girlhood. Talking and listening to girls can help them become savvy media consumers.

But advocating for media literacy does raise a cautionary flag. While it is noble to try to teach parents how to engage their daughters in critical readings of popular culture, there is the potential that this a class issue. Ellen Seiter has suggested that, in the past, feminists have unfairly targeted the popular culture that is accessible to the working class as being sexist. She argues that educated middle-class mothers have used feminist critiques of girls' culture as a means to justify a moral high ground and separate themselves from their working-class contemporaries. I have to wonder if the push for media literacy can play out in a similar manner, and if it allows for educated middle-class

mothers who have access to alternative media sources and the tools of media literacy to distance themselves from those who do not have the "cultural capital" (Bourdieu) to engage with such perspectives.

While it is easy to be critical of such narratives from an academic perspective, I cannot deny that as a mother I am terrified of the social and cultural pressures that face my daughters. I can't help but lament: Will they grow up feeling that their own power comes from being sexually permissive? Will their sense of self-worth come from how they are perceived by boys? Furthermore, as a feminist, I am deeply concerned about the implications of the eroticization of girlhood on girls themselves. Globally, hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of young girls have been forced to be prostitutes in a burgeoning sex trade that is a multi-billion-dollar-a-year industry (Durham 205). While of course there are numerous economic and political reasons for their exploitation, one cannot deny that the repeated representation of the sexuality of girls according to the agendas of the corporate media and not to the needs of girls themselves contributes to the treatment of young girls as sexual objects. The limited representations in popular culture of young girls as being sexually available or, worse, wanting to be sexual, potentially legitimizes their exploitation.

But I also have to ask: Why now? Why at this moment are there three books that critique the mediascape and offer narratives of hope through media



literacy? Clearly, the books demonstrate a desperate need by parents to feel that they have some control over the lives of their children, specifically girls. What's interesting about these texts is how girls continue to be a repository of our fears (Brumberg). I think if we take a step back we can see that our fears about a loss of control over media culture and over our children's consumption of such culture coalesce around girls. Each text has an overtly stated goal to empower parents by providing them with the knowledge and skills to communicate effectively with their children to assist them in navigating a media culture that sexualizes the child. Yet, none of the books really question why we accept, or at least tolerate, these narrow images of girlhood.

One book that stands out as different is *"Girl Power": Girls Reinventing Girlhood* by Dawn Currie, Deirdre Kelly, and Shauna Pomerantz. Unlike the other three, this book is clearly an academic text written primarily for scholars in the field of girls' studies. And, unlike the other three texts that focus on representations of girls and girlhood in popular culture, Currie, Kelly, and Pomerantz ask how girls actually negotiate these representations. The authors place actual girls at the centre of their analysis. The subtitle "Girls Reinventing Girlhood" clearly captures the spirit of the work, which uses the voices and experiences of actual girls to give meaning to girlhood. The real strength of this book is its methodological approach to

girls and girls' culture. In this work, girls give meaning to their own experiences, which are understood by the researchers to be accurate reflections (65), as opposed to being treated as raw data that requires the expertise of a researcher to interpret.

*"Girl Power"* appreciates the complex relationship girls have to popular culture. For girls, girlhood is not simply a representation in the media, it is an embodied practice of meaning-making. *"Girl Power"* begins by asking, how do girls "do girlhood?" (53). While the authors address how popular culture may mediate how young women understand their gender identities, they remind us that girlhood is not a separate identity out there waiting for girls to grow into it; instead, it is a constant experience of meaning-making. Currie, Kelly, and Pomerantz analyze how three particular girl communities (populars, skaters, and online girls) negotiate girlhood, gender, and power.

The authors of *"Girl Power"* are interested in girls' culture, not the culture that is made for girls and that is the object of study of the other three texts. The difference here is critical. Without engaging with girls themselves to address how they take up and experience such discursive formations, the authors of *The Lolita Effect*, *Packaging Girlhood*, and *So Sexy So Soon* assume that popular culture produced for girls has a negative impact on girls. *"Girl Power"* is critical of these types of adult-initiated arguments that girls are in trouble that form the backbone of the other

three books. Currie, Kelly, and Pomerantz attempt to resist this type of feminist analysis that conceives of girls being at risk by the patriarchal media machine and that is part of a linear process of socialization toward the completed woman subject. They are more interested in how girls navigate the discourses offered to them. Instead of considering how feminists can save girls by making them aware of the sexist images that are presented to them, *"Girl Power"* addresses how girls negotiate what it means to be a girl and, in doing so, engage with feminism as an ongoing praxis. They conclude that "becoming a feminist is a much more complex, ongoing project than typically acknowledged" (168).

## Conclusion

All four of these books were written in the aftermath of the incessant mantra of the late-1990s call for girl power. The publication of these texts reveals the failure of girl power and ultimately of feminism in providing safe spaces for girls. It is an image of power in name only. Girl power promised to give girls the ability to do what they want and to be understood on their own terms, to take control of their own bodies and

to be sexual agents. But what went wrong? How did this notion of empowerment dissolve into girls being "hotties"? There is little reference in the conception of girl power to women of power. Instead, girl power has become the power to become a model or a pop star, to buy a sparkly pink cami or lacy thong underwear, but has failed to offer any structural changes in young girls' lives (see Driscoll; Harris and Fine; Riordan). All four of these books contribute to the growing field of girls' studies, which developed partially in response to the failure of girl power to offer girls what it promised.

Of course this leaves me with one question: what the hell am I going to do next Christmas? Do I buy the Barbie doll with the black boots and hope that we can have meaningful conversations about what that implies about girls' sexuality, or do I search the shopping mall for something more appropriate, silently informing my daughter that her desired girls' culture has little value by her feminist mommy's standards? I'm still not sure what I am going to do, but I do know one thing: no matter how much reading or research I do in the area of girls' studies, it's still so hard to figure out the answers. All I can do as a parent and as an academic is muddle through.

## Works Cited

- Bourdieu, Pierre. *Distinction*. Trans. Richard Nice. N.p.: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984. Print.
- Brumberg, Joan Jacobs. *The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls*. New York: Random House, 1997. Print.
- Driscoll, Catherine. *Girls: Feminine Adolescence in Popular Culture and Cultural Theory*. New York: Columbia UP, 2002. Print.
- Harris, Anita, and Michelle Fine, eds. *All About the Girl: Culture, Power and Identity*. New York: Routledge, 2004. Print.
- Riordan, Ellen. "Commodified Agents and Empowered Girls: Consuming and Producing Feminism." *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 25.3 (2001): 279–97. Print.
- Seiter, E. *Sold Separately: Children and Parents in Consumer Culture*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1993. Print.

Natalie Coulter has just completed her Ph.D. at the School of Communication at Simon Fraser University. Her thesis is entitled "Tweening the Girl: The Crystallization of the Tween Market 1980–1995." She is an Assistant Professor in the Communication Studies department at Wilfrid Laurier University.